

Effects of Groupthink on Tactical Decision-Making

**A Monograph
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14. ABSTRACT

Irving Janis introduced the theory of groupthink in his classic study *Victims of Groupthink* in 1972. He attempted to determine why groups, often consisting of individuals with exceptional intellect and talent, made irrational decisions. He concluded that groups often experienced groupthink, a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive group, when the members' striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action. His major proposition was groups that displayed groupthink symptoms were more likely to produce poor decision outcomes. His initial works sparked an explosion of research into how group behaviors, biases, and pressures affect group decision-making. Groupthink has become a widely studied and accepted phenomenon. Groupthink is a widely utilized theory in social psychology, organizational theory, group decision-making sciences, and management fields. Research into the phenomenon of groupthink is a pertinent area of study that involves understanding how group processes influence the making of decisions. This includes the analysis of the conditions under which miscalculations; faulty information processing, inadequate surveys of alternatives, and other potentially avoided errors are most probable. Many professional fields have recognized the impact of group behaviors, and specifically the phenomenon of groupthink, on decision-making. Unfortunately, US Army doctrine does not address how group behaviors influence decisions. This is a critical weakness in doctrine since tactical level decision-making and planning occurs in a collaborative group environment. The military decision making process, the Army's doctrinal decision-making process, relies on analysis, inputs, and recommendations from the commander and staff. The commander and staff normally work in a group environment to plan, synchronize, and control combat operations. This makes tactical level decision-making vulnerable to many negative group influences such as groupthink. This monograph examines how group behaviors influence decision-making and ultimately mission outcomes at the tactical level. Specifically, the monograph determines whether groupthink negatively affects decision-making at the battalion and brigade level. The underlying proposition of this research is that commanders and staffs that display the symptoms of groupthink are more likely to display symptoms of defective decision-making, leading to poor mission outcomes. The author uses two case studies supplemented by empirical evidence from prominent researchers and scientists to determine the occurrence of groupthink. Groupthink theory defines several antecedent factors that combine to form the groupthink tendency. The theory also defines groupthink symptoms and defective decision-making symptoms that result from the groupthink tendency. These antecedent conditions along with the presence of one or more groupthink symptoms provide the evidence to support conclusions about the occurrence of groupthink in each case study. The author has organized the monograph into four chapters. The first chapter defines the theory of groupthink. Following chapters examine two military case studies where groupthink contributed to a poor decision outcome. The final chapter provides recommendations for commanders

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ABSTRACT

EFFECTS OF GROUPTHINK ON TACTICAL DECISION-MAKING by MAJOR Phillip M. Johnson, USA, 43 pages.

Irving Janis introduced the theory of groupthink in his classic study *Victims of Groupthink* in 1972. He attempted to determine why groups, often consisting of individuals with exceptional intellect and talent, made irrational decisions. He concluded that groups often experienced groupthink, a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive group, when the members' striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action. His major proposition was groups that displayed groupthink symptoms were more likely to produce poor decision outcomes. His initial works sparked an explosion of research into how group behaviors, biases, and pressures affect group decision-making. Groupthink has become a widely studied and accepted phenomenon. Groupthink is a widely utilized theory in social psychology, organizational theory, group decision-making sciences, and management fields. Research into the phenomenon of groupthink is a pertinent area of study that involves understanding how group processes influence the making of decisions. This includes the analysis of the conditions under which miscalculations; faulty information processing, inadequate surveys of alternatives, and other potentially avoided errors are most probable.

Many professional fields have recognized the impact of group behaviors, and specifically the phenomenon of groupthink, on decision-making. Unfortunately, US Army doctrine does not address how group behaviors influence decisions. This is a critical weakness in doctrine since tactical level decision-making and planning occurs in a collaborative group environment. The military decision making process, the Army's doctrinal decision-making process, relies on analysis, inputs, and recommendations from the commander and staff. The commander and staff normally work in a group environment to plan, synchronize, and control combat operations. This makes tactical level decision-making vulnerable to many negative group influences such as groupthink.

This monograph examines how group behaviors influence decision-making and ultimately mission outcomes at the tactical level. Specifically, the monograph determines whether groupthink negatively affects decision-making at the battalion and brigade level. The underlying proposition of this research is that commanders and staffs that display the symptoms of groupthink are more likely to display symptoms of defective decision-making, leading to poor mission outcomes.

The author uses two case studies supplemented by empirical evidence from prominent researchers and scientists to determine the occurrence of groupthink. Groupthink theory defines several antecedent factors that combine to form the groupthink tendency. The theory also defines groupthink symptoms and defective decision-making symptoms that result from the groupthink tendency. These antecedent conditions along with the presence of one or more groupthink symptoms provide the evidence to support conclusions about the occurrence of groupthink in each case study.

The author has organized the monograph into four chapters. The first chapter defines the theory of groupthink. Following chapters examine two military case studies where groupthink contributed to a poor decision outcome. The final chapter provides recommendations for commanders and their staffs, US Army doctrine, and officer education. The monograph concludes that tactical level commanders and staffs are vulnerable to the groupthink tendency.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	
Background	1
Purpose.....	3
Chapter One, Theoretical Foundations	
The Groupthink Definition	6
The Groupthink Model.....	6
Groupthink Symptoms	7
Limitations of the Theory.....	9
Chapter Two, Research Design	
Core Assumptions	12
Methodology.....	13
Chapter Three, Case Studies and Evaluation	
Case Study Trends	15
Implications of the Korean War Case Study	20
Implications for Tactical Level Decision-Making.....	21
Tactical Level Case Study	22
Case Study Trends	24
Common Trends and Evaluation	26
Conclusion	31
Chapter Four, Recommendations	
Role of the Commander.....	33
Staff Training	35
Doctrine.....	37
Officer Education	39
Conclusions	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	42

INTRODUCTION

“How could we have been so stupid?” President John F. Kennedy asked after realizing the failure of the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.¹ The plan was to overthrow the Castro government with an invasion by a small brigade of Cuban exiles. The decision of President Kennedy and his small group of advisors to launch the invasion was a major foreign policy disaster. The entire invasion force was killed or captured within days, and the US government had to send food and supplies to Cuba to ransom the survivors. The invasion plan was based on six assumptions which all proved wrong. In retrospect President Kennedy and his advisors could have seen the flaws of each assumption as they began consideration and discussion of the plan. Sufficient information was available to indicate the assumptions were wrong. Even in light of this information and indicators of potential failure, there were no serious doubts about the success of the invasion plan expressed by President Kennedy or any of his advisors during planning. So why did President Kennedy and his advisors, men of considerable talent and intellect, collectively fail to detect serious flaws in the invasion plan? This was the question that Irving L. Janis attempted to answer in 1972. Janis concluded that the members of this group experienced groupthink, a distorted style of thinking that occurs in cohesive groups that renders them incapable of making a rational decision.

Background

Janis introduced the theory of groupthink in his book *Victims of Groupthink*. Janis broadened his study to include a number of foreign policy crises, some with successful decision outcomes and others with poor decision outcomes. Janis approached these crises from the standpoint of group dynamics, building on the previous works of other social scientists. He concluded that groups that developed high cohesiveness along with other antecedent factors sought to maintain concurrence on important issues at the expense of ignoring realistic challenges

to solutions developed by the group. The term groupthink refers to "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action."² His major proposition was groups that displayed groupthink symptoms were more likely to produce poor decision outcomes. The original theory first proposed by Janis in 1972, and later expanded in 1982, quickly gained popularity and helped launch new research into the effect of group dynamics on decision outcomes.³ Groupthink has become a widely studied and utilized theory in social psychology, organizational theory, political science, management fields, and group decision-making literature. The goal is to explain how groups arrive at decisions and to identify conditions and factors that lead to defective decision-making.

"Recent surveys of social science research in decision making repeatedly call attention to the current state of ignorance about how crucial decisions are made by governments, business corporations, and other public organizations, as well as by individuals."⁴ Currently there is not an accepted, comprehensive theory encompassing all the factors and variables that explain how groups and individuals make decisions. Research into the phenomenon of groupthink is a pertinent area of study involving understanding how group processes influence the making of decisions, including analysis of the conditions under which miscalculations, faulty information processing, inadequate surveys of alternatives, and other potentially avoidable errors are most probable. This research provides useful insight into important aspects of group behavior and its impact on decision outcomes. It is the negative effect on decision outcomes that makes groupthink theory relevant to organizational planners and leaders.

¹ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 16.

² Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1972), 9.

³ In 1982 Janis revised and expanded *Victims of Groupthink*. The new revision was *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983).

⁴ Frank Heller, *Decision Making and Leadership* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

Because the groupthink phenomenon has a potentially negative impact on decision outcomes, it is of particular importance to the US Army. Timely and effective decision-making is one of the most critical requirements for successful combat operations. Decision-making lies at the heart of battle command, the exercise of command in operations against a hostile, thinking opponent.⁵ “Effective battle command demands decisions that are both timely and more effective than those of opponents.”⁶ Staffs play a central role in supporting their commander. Staffs provide commanders with critical information, analysis, and recommendations necessary for making decisions while also controlling unit activities to implement decisions that have already been made. Commanders usually rely very heavily on their staffs to assist in planning future operations as well as developing plans to adjust execution of current operations. Plans are normally developed by utilizing the military decision making process (MDMP), a methodical planning process that relies on input, analysis, and recommendations from staff members in a collaborative group environment. Planning for and controlling military operations is primarily done in a group decision-making environment consisting of the commander and his staff. If groupthink is occurring it could be one factor contributing to defective decision making and poor decision outcomes.

Purpose

The purpose of this monograph is to answer the research question: does groupthink negatively affect decision making at the battalion and brigade level? The research uses a case analysis approach supplemented by evidence and findings from empirical research to determine the occurrence of groupthink. This monograph provides several recommendations for changes in doctrine, training, and staff procedures to improve decision-making and planning processes. The ultimate goal is to stimulate further empirical research that will lead to increased understanding of when, how, and why avoidable errors in tactical decision making occur. A better understanding

⁵ Department of the Army. *FM 3-0 Operations (DRAG Edition)*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2000), 3-0.

of groupthink could prove useful to the development of doctrine, techniques, and educational methods to eliminate or mitigate its occurrence during decision-making.

The underlying proposition of this research is that small group dynamics have a direct effect on the quality of tactical decisions. Specifically, commanders and staffs that display the symptoms of groupthink are more likely to display symptoms of defective decision making, which leads to poor mission outcomes. Given the stakes involved in battalion and brigade-level decisions, this potentially harmful phenomenon needs further exploration.

⁶ Ibid., 5-2

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Irving L. Janis began his research on groupthink after reading an account of the Kennedy Administration's so-called Bay of Pigs decision. His classic study *Victims of Groupthink* analyzed some major policy decisions made by several US presidents and their closest advisors. Examples include the poorly made decision of President Kennedy and his advisors to attempt the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba; the well-made decisions of practically the same group in handling the Cuban missile crisis; the poorly made decision of the Johnson Administration to escalate the Vietnam War effort; and the poorly made decisions of President Nixon and his advisors to attempt to cover up their involvement in the Watergate Hotel break-in. His research into these crisis situations led to his development of the groupthink theory.

Although Janis' groupthink theory was based on historical case studies and not empirical evidence it quickly found mass appeal. Groupthink became extremely popular in a wide range of literature. Articles warning of the dangers of groupthink and suggesting remedies appeared in management, psychology, and sociology periodicals. Groupthink even entered the popular vocabulary. Numerous research efforts since Janis' initial works have attempted to explain, prove, expand, and refine the original theory of groupthink.⁷ This research has taken two distinct patterns—case analysis and empirical analysis of part(s) of Janis' groupthink theory. Significant case analysis research include studies of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission (Smith 1984), Kent State Gym Controversy (Hensley and Griffins 1986), Space Shuttle Disaster (Moorhead, Ference, and Neck (1991), and jury deliberations in the trial of US vs. John DeLorean (Neck and Moorhead 1992). Empirical analysis utilizes laboratory tests of various aspects of the groupthink theory. Empirical studies have helped link the groupthink model with other human decision-making and group behavior theories while validating the groupthink theory.

The Groupthink Definition

Janis defines groupthink as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.”⁸ His major proposition is that groups displaying most of the symptoms of groupthink are more likely to display symptoms of defective decision making, resulting in poor policy outcomes.⁹ The crucial determinant of groupthink is moderate to high group cohesion combined with one or more other antecedent conditions. In turn, these factors contribute to defective decision making by the group.

The Groupthink Model

The groupthink model (see Figure 1) provides a visual representation of the theory of groupthink, including the conditions under which groupthink is likely to occur, the symptoms of groupthink, and the consequences resulting from groupthink. According to the model the antecedent condition of a moderately or highly cohesive group (Box A) interacts with other structural faults of the organization (Box B-1) and/or provocative situational context factors (Box B-2) to increase the probability of the groupthink tendency. The groupthink tendency is expressed in the observable consequences of the symptoms of groupthink (Box C). When a group displays most of the symptoms of groupthink, we can expect to find that the group will also display symptoms of defective decision-making (Box D).¹⁰ Defective decision-making normally lowers the probability of a successful decision outcome (Box E). “The theory predicts that when a group is moderately or highly cohesive (Box A), the more of the antecedent conditions listed in

⁷ For a review of this research effort refer to James Esser, “Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research.” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73, no. 2/3 (1998): 116-141.

⁸ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

boxes B-1 and B-2 that are present, the greater the chances of defective decision making as a result of the groupthink syndrome.”¹¹

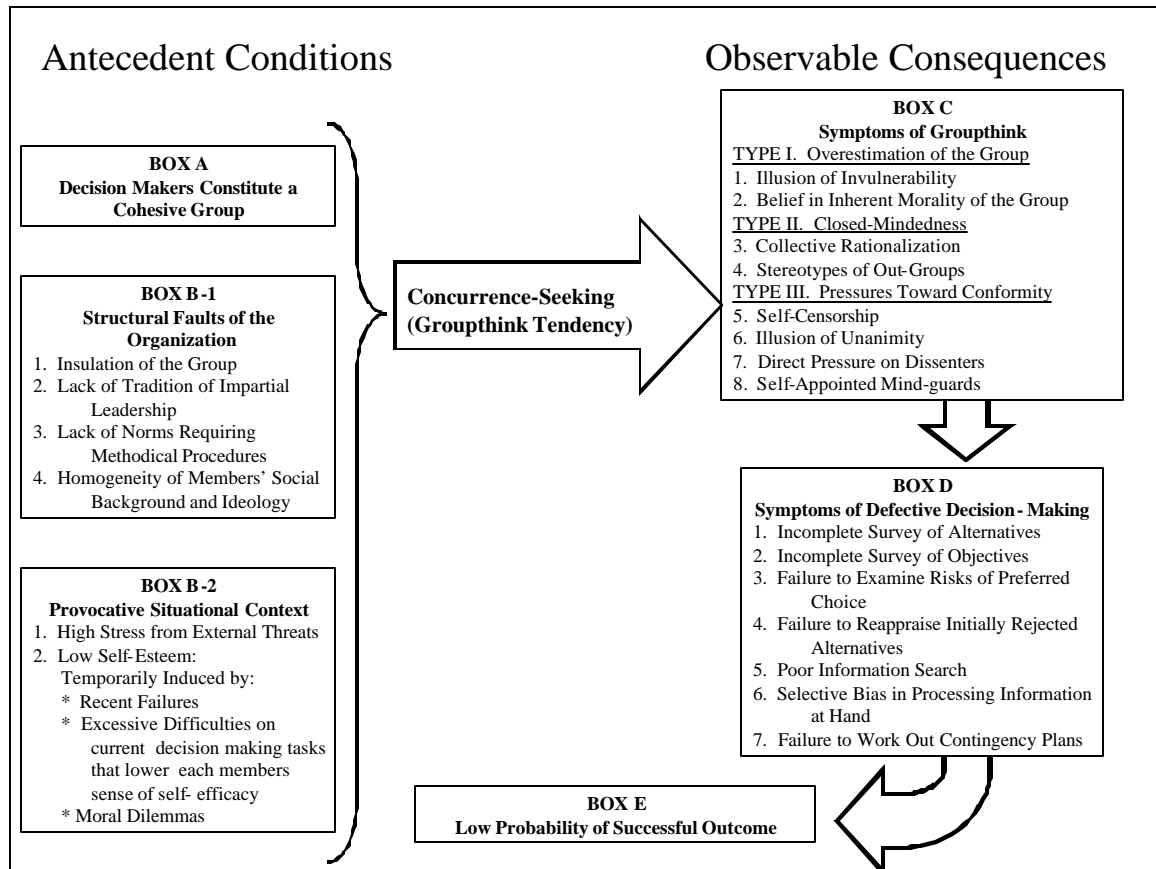


Figure 1. The Groupthink Model.¹²

Groupthink Symptoms

The model presents three types of groupthink symptoms described here in outline form.

TYPE I: Overestimation of the Group

1. Illusion of Invulnerability. This symptom is defined as excessive optimism that encourages taking extreme risks with little consideration of what would happen if the worst outcome should

¹¹ Ibid., 245.

occur or the consequences of the solution proposed by the group. This always includes the overestimation of the potential success of the solution or the abilities of the group.

2. Belief in the Inherent Morality of the Group. This symptom implies that the group ignores the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.

TYPE II: Close Mindedness

3. Collective Rationalization. This is an effort by members of the group to discount, withhold, or distort warnings and other information that could threaten the group's belief by convincing themselves as to the validity of the group's position. The group does not realistically or seriously consider outside information or other potential decision alternatives.

4. Stereotypes of Out-Groups. "Just as the groups are overconfident in their own powers and morality, they tend to believe their opponents are weak or foolish."¹³ This results in an underestimation of their opponent's ability to counter or interfere with the group's plan.

TYPE III: Pressures Toward Uniformity

5. Self-Censorship. This occurs when members hold back expressing their doubts or deviations from the apparent group consensus. This may reflect each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments.¹⁴

6. Illusion of Unanimity. Self-censorship and other devices create an environment of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view. This environment is also facilitated by the false assumption that silence means consent.

7. Direct Pressures on Dissenters. The group uses direct social pressure on any members who express dissent with the majority's views, stereotypes, proposed solution, or commitment. Group pressures and norms make it clear that dissenting viewpoints and behavior are contrary to expected group norms of loyalty.

¹² Ibid., 244.

¹³ Jonathan Baron, *Thinking and Deciding*. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 282.

¹⁴ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 175.

8. Self-Appointed Mind-Guards. Members of the group take it upon themselves to protect the group from adverse information that could threaten the group's shared complacency and to keep others in line with the supposed consensus.

Limitations of the Theory

Groupthink is only one factor among other influencing variables that could affect the quality of decisions. One cannot assume that groupthink is the cause of practically every miscalculation or poor decision reached by a group. Groupthink theory suggests that poor decision outcomes are more likely when groupthink symptoms are present. Groupthink does not always result in a bad decision. Even when groupthink is occurring the group consensus and inherent biases could result in developing an effective solution to the problem at hand. Likewise, poor decisions cannot be avoided by simply avoiding groupthink. Other factors such as a lack of necessary information, inadequate time for decision-making, poor judgment, pure luck, and unexpected actions by adversaries also play a role in the probability of a successful decision outcome. Other determinants of the decision process, such as the group's competence, the heuristics used in the process, and the entire organizational set-up in which the group operates is likely to affect the quality of the decision. Simply stated, some group biases and decision-making failures cannot be explained in terms of groupthink. The value of groupthink is that it helps explain one factor that could lower the probability of a successful decision outcome.

There is nothing wrong with group decision-making and decision-making support for a commander. Battalions and brigade utilize group decision-making techniques to develop tactical plans and recommendations that assist the commander in making decisions during battle. When groups work well they are demonstratively superior to individual decision making abilities.

Working in groups provide several advantages such as more knowledge, the ability to generate more ideas, longer and more accurate memories, and better evaluation of concepts, opinions, and courses of action. Groups generally have a greater probability of discovering errors in plans and usually better standards and rules for decision making. "This is the power of the team mind: to

create new and unexpected solutions, options, and interpretations, drawing on the experience of all the team members to generate products that are beyond the capabilities of any of the individuals.”¹⁵ The problem occurs when group pressures, biases, and other behaviors reduce the quality of the decision. Groupthink tends to strengthen the group's cohesion and reinforce self-complacency and group biases among its members, while drastically lowering the quality of decisions. The effect in many groups is decisions that are definitely inferior to decisions made individually. Groupthink theory offers insight into understanding how various factors and conditions combine to affect decision outcomes.

Conclusions

Groupthink theory explains one factor that can contribute to defective decision-making. This makes groupthink an important area of exploration for military research concerning decision-making. The following chapters of this monograph will examine the conditions of command and control within brigades and battalions, outline the research methodology, and provide two case studies in which groupthink occurred during military operations. Understanding how groupthink affects decision-making and developing techniques to reduce the occurrence of groupthink provides an opportunity for improving military decision-making.

¹⁵ Gray Klein. *Sources of Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 245.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH DESIGN

A commander's goal is to control the terms of battle and impose his will on the enemy by making and executing effective decisions faster than the enemy can react. The unit's command and control (C2) system is designed to support this goal. Commanders organize their staffs within command posts to perform essential staff functions that aid in planning for and controlling operations. In a brigade the C2 system is normally distributed among four organizations—the command group, tactical command post (CP), main CP, and rear CP.¹⁶ In a battalion the C2 system is also distributed among four organizations – the command group, main CP, combat trains CP, and field trains CP.¹⁷ At brigade and battalion level the main CP is the unit's command center. This is the commander's principal C2 facility where the preponderance of mission planning, supervision, and control occurs.

The groups that Janis studied were subject to various stressors and conditions that facilitated the groupthink tendency. Janis identified and categorized these factors as antecedent conditions. One or more of these conditions combined with cohesion facilitates the occurrence of groupthink. Just like the groups that Janis studied, brigade and battalion C2 systems are subject to similar antecedent conditions. Brigades and battalions normally operate under extreme time constraints, in adverse conditions, and with the constant threat of violence and danger. Carl Von Clausewitz described this environment of war as consisting of four elements: “danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance.”¹⁸ These conditions place enormous stress on the commander and staff and create a favorable environment for the occurrence of groupthink.

¹⁶ See FM 71-3, *The Armored and Mechanized Infantry Brigade* for Army doctrine about brigade command and control facilities and organization.

¹⁷ See FM 71-2, *The Armored and Mechanized Infantry Battalion* for Army doctrine about battalion command and control facilities and organization.

¹⁸ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*. Translated by Micheal Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 104.

Core Assumptions

This research is based on three core assumptions. First, battalion and brigade C2 systems rely on small groups for planning, synchronizing, and controlling combat operations. At the battalion and brigade level, the staff is organized along functional areas of responsibility and is further organized to serve in command posts and a command group. The complex nature of combined arms operations and the size of battalions and brigades is beyond the ability of one or two individuals to control. Battalion and brigade operations require a degree of staff specialization to provide adequate control and supervision of activities. Because of specialization along functional areas and a division of labor within the staff they must come together in groups for planning, monitoring, and controlling operations in order to exchange information, coordinate activities, gain situational understanding, and make recommendations. The vast majority of work relating to the command and control of operations is done in small groups. This includes mission planning, conducting various types of rehearsals, staff meetings to develop recommendations, targeting meetings, and other synchronization meetings.

Second, small group factors have a distant and significant power in the analysis, recommendation, and development of solutions to complex problems.¹⁹ These group factors have a similar effect on the commander and his staff as they work together in a group environment. As a result the commander and staff members are subject to many of the generalizations about group dynamics. Since the commander and staff work in groups to plan and control operations they will share many of the same behaviors as other planning and decision making groups.

Third, understanding small group behavior in military organizations will help explain how decisions are made and provide insight into potential ways to improve tactical decision making. Current US Army doctrine does not address groupthink and does not discuss the

¹⁹ This statement is further supported and explained by Paul Hart in his book *Beyond Groupthink*. See Paul Hart, *Beyond Groupthink, Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-Making* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

influence of group dynamics on decision-making.²⁰ Likewise, publications from the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) do not address groupthink or other group behavior that may affect the quality of decisions.²¹ The preponderance of CALL lessons learned about decision-making, and especially about how decisions are made, concentrate on the commander's individual decision-making skills, adherence to the MDMP, and physical arrangements inside of command and control facilities. Other areas that doctrine and CALL publications focus on are staff procedures and techniques used in planning and controlling operations. Applying groupthink theory to tactical command and control considers the in-group biases, tendencies, and pressures that may reduce the quality of decisions during combat operations. Developing techniques to mitigate the groupthink tendency should reduce one factor that leads to defective decision-making.

Methodology

The goal of this research is to determine if groupthink is adversely affecting tactical decision-making. This research uses selected case studies combined with evidence and research from empirical studies to determine the occurrence of groupthink. The groupthink model defines several antecedent conditions that contribute to the groupthink tendency along with two categories of observable consequences, groupthink symptoms and symptoms of defective decision-making. These antecedent conditions along with the presence of one or more groupthink symptoms provide the evidence to support conclusions about the occurrence of groupthink in each case study.

²⁰ This conclusion was based on a review of current US Army command and control doctrine found in 100-series and 71-series field manuals.

²¹ This conclusion is based on a review of all Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) databases and published CTC trends and lessons learned periodicals (fiscal years 1995-1999). Only one reference about groupthink was found in CALL Newsletter 90-8, *Winning in the Desert I: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for the Maneuver Commander* (pg 24). The publication gave the following advice to commanders: “**Do not fall victim to ‘groupthink!’** Widespread agreement among the staff is not necessarily a healthy sign. It could mean that the desire to find agreement is overriding critical thinking. In times of stress there will be a natural desire to reduce that stress by increasing group harmony and ignoring problems. Be alert for groupthink and when you suspect it is occurring, take a devil's advocate position and actively find the flaws that everyone is missing.”

The following chapter examines two case studies that include the occurrence of groupthink during military operations. The first case study is an analysis of decisions made by President Truman's administration and General Douglas MacArthur that escalated the Korean conflict by attacking north of the 38th Parallel. The second case study examines the planning and execution of an attack by a maneuver battalion at the National Training Center. These two case studies provide the evidence to support the major proposition of this monograph; that commanders and staffs that display groupthink symptoms are more likely to engage in defective decision-making. The case studies also reveal several important trends that require further examination to support the future development of doctrine, techniques, and procedures to mitigate the occurrence of groupthink during tactical planning and decision-making.

CHAPTER THREE

CASE STUDIES AND EVALUATION

By mid-October 1950 American and United Nations' (UN) forces had turned the tide of the war in Korea. After the successful Inchon landings and Eighth Army's breakout of the Pusan Perimeter General MacArthur, with the consent of Washington, planned for the complete destruction of communist forces in North Korea. After attacking across the 38th Parallel, UN forces captured the North Korean capital of Pyongyang on October 19, 1950. UN forces continued to push north despite supply problems, bad weather, and steady resistance from remaining communist forces. From October 25 to November 6, Chinese forces attacked suddenly from the hills then withdrew after inflicting heavy casualties on Republic of Korea units and one American infantry regiment.²² After a short operational pause UN forces initiated their final push to the North Korean-Chinese border. "The UN offensive ended barely a day after it began, as Chinese attacks slammed into the Eighth Army and X Corps on the night of November 26-27, 1950."²³ UN forces tumbled back in retreat while suffering heavy losses from the massive Chinese offensive. It was the longest retreat in US history. The decision to continue the UN advance north of the 38th Parallel provides an important example of the occurrence of groupthink. The fact that key decision makers at the national and operational level failed to anticipate Chinese intervention into war despite several indicators suggests defective decision-making. The presence of several antecedent conditions and groupthink symptoms indicates the occurrence of groupthink.

Case Study Trends

Several antecedent conditions were present during this case study. First, time pressures were present at both the strategic and operational level. President Truman's administration was operating under the time pressures created by an upcoming election and the need to conclude the

²² Eliot A. Cohen, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. (New York: Free Press, 1990), 168.

conflict in Korea quickly to avoid further escalation and loss of American lives. General MacArthur's time pressures came from the need to reach the Yalu River before it froze in mid-November. Once frozen, Chinese forces could cross the river easily at any location.²⁴ Both groups faced serious external threats from the North Korean military, a potential Chinese intervention, and the potential for the conflict to escalate into a worldwide war. Janis also concluded that both groups operated with a degree of insulation that helped create the groupthink tendency and aided in the development of group biases.

Cohesion was a key antecedent condition that was present at the strategic level with President Truman and his advisors and at the operational level with General MacArthur and his headquarters. Both groups displayed a high degree of cohesion. During the first week of daily conferences about the Korean conflict, Truman's group of advisors developed a high degree of solidarity.²⁵ The members of the group continued to maintain a high degree of esprit de corps and mutual admiration for one another based on their shared values, belief in the rightness of the American cause, and their commitment to blunt communist threats. Likewise, General MacArthur and his key subordinates maintained cohesion due to their faith in MacArthur's leadership, their shared military education and values, and a confidence in American military power. There were no indications that any key members of either group openly expressed doubts about the major decisions being made during the crisis. It appears that both groups expressed complete consensus about the decisions of their leaders.²⁶

²³ Ibid., 168.

²⁴ Clayton D. James, *The Years of Macarthur*. vol. III, *Triumph and Disaster*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 524.

²⁵ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 49.

²⁶ Clark McCauley, "The Nature of Social Influence in Groupthink: Compliance and Internalization." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 3 (1989): 255.

Both groups were affected by promotional leadership influences.²⁷ President Truman took the early view that world communism in general and the Russians in particular were testing US resolve: “I told my advisors...the Reds were probing for weakness in our armor; we had to meet their thrust without getting embroiled in a world-wide war.”²⁸ According to Glen Paige, a prominent political scientist, an analysis of the documents and interviews bearing on the decision to enter the Korean War in June 1950, the President set the tone at all the meetings with his advisors. He strongly shaped the group consensus as each successive step was taken to deepen America’s involvement in North Korea.²⁹ Likewise, General MacArthur’s conviction about completing the destruction of the communist threat in North Korea, his assessment that China would not intervene, and confidence in American military power influenced the views and analysis of his key subordinates. The influence of promotional leadership helped create groupthink tendencies in both groups. The effect of this promotional leadership was to limit the number of options considered, decrease impartial information analysis, increase risk-taking, and decrease the consideration of the potential consequences of each decision.

Both groups expressed the groupthink symptom of an “illusion of invulnerability.” Both groups considered the likelihood of a Chinese intervention as remote and in the event of intervention it was believed that UN forces could handle the threat. During their Wake Island meeting General MacArthur confidently informed President Truman that if China entered the conflict that UN forces could handle them and he was sure that the “victory was won in Korea.”³⁰

²⁷ The term directive leadership is also used to refer to promotional leadership by some authors such as Paul t’ Hart. Both terms refer to a leadership style that promotes or directs one course of action or decision option very early in the planning process. The leader’s early promotion of his preference is often a contributing factor to impartial information search, bias information evaluation, and the tendency towards conformity, the groupthink tendency.

²⁸ Ibid., 255.

²⁹ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 68.

³⁰ Clayton D. James, *The Years of Macarthur*. vol. III, *Triumph and Disaster*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 505.

In addition both groups placed an excessive value on the effectiveness of American airpower.³¹ It was generally believed that in the event of a Chinese intervention, US air power would quickly devastate the attacking forces.

Both groups expressed a stereotypical view of the Chinese, a common symptom of groupthink. Janis clearly articulated this symptom's effect on Truman and his advisors:

“One of the dominant stereotypes shared by all members of Truman’s advisory group was that Red China was a weak nation, whose main source of potency in world affairs came from its affiliation with the Soviet Union, which meant that China’s foreign policy was largely dominated by Russia. The members failed to take account of obvious indications that this over-simplified conception might not apply to Red China’s possible responses to American troops in Korea. It contributed to their miscalculation of the risk of provoking a full-scale military response if the United States attempted to use its military power to gain control over China’s neighbor and ally. The group members’ failure to scrutinize to their stereotyped misconception and to consider alternative hypothesis concerning Red China’s capabilities and intentions is a prime symptom of groupthink.”³²

At the operational level, American commanders also expressed stereotypical views of the Chinese. It was generally believed that the infantry-heavy Chinese forces would be no match for US ground and air power. American commanders clearly underestimated the mobility of Chinese infantry forces on the restricted terrain of Korea. American units did not expect the Chinese style night attacks, which eventually took heavy tolls on American forces. This underestimation of Chinese capabilities was compounded by a severe under estimation of the Chinese numerical strength.

The most serious and most obvious groupthink symptom expressed by both groups was “collective rationalization.” Despite several warnings from the Chinese government the Truman

³¹ Cohen, Eliot A. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. (New York: Free Press, 1990), 191.

³² Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 59.

Administration and General MacArthur considered the intervention of the Chinese as unlikely.³³ Further General MacArthur and his intelligence officers clearly underestimated the strength of Chinese forces south of the Yalu River despite information from captured Chinese prisoners of war and from intelligence sources in Taiwan.³⁴ Even after the first encounter with significant Chinese forces in North Korea at the beginning of November, General MacArthur, his intelligence officers, and subordinate commanders continued to estimate that only 16,500 Chinese were involved in a covert operation against UN forces.³⁵ Actually there were already over 180,000 Chinese troops in North Korea.³⁶ Furthermore, General MacArthur and his subordinates rationalized away the indicators of the Chinese intention to mount a full- scale invasion. Evidence from captured Chinese troops and growing encounters with Chinese troops in North Korea indicated the likelihood of a Chinese invasion. As UN forces advanced closer to the Chinese border their formations became more dispersed and less mutually supporting. Once the Chinese invasion began in full-scale UN forces were in a position of great disadvantage, unprepared for and surprised by the Chinese onslaught.

The decisions of the Truman Administration and General MacArthur to escalate the war in Korea by continuing the UN offensive north of the 38th Parallel is a case study that shows the occurrence of groupthink in a military operation. In his book, *Groupthink*, Janis provides a narrative description of the Korean conflict to develop and illustrate the groupthink theory. In 1979 Philip Tetlock, a prominent social scientist, also examined the North Korea case study as part of his reanalysis of the groupthink theory.³⁷ His results supported the groupthink hypothesis as determined by Janis. In 1989 Clark McCauley also reexamined several historical case studies

³³ Ibid., 58.

³⁴ Eliot A. Cohen, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. (New York: Free Press, 1990), 175.

³⁵ Clayton D. James, *The Years of Macarthur*. vol. III, *Triumph and Disaster*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 519.

³⁶ Ibid., 519.

³⁷ Philip E. Tetlock, "Identify Victims of Groupthink from Public Statements of Decision Makers." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (1979): 1314-1324.

including the Korean War case.³⁸ His conclusions also supported the occurrence of groupthink while extending the groupthink theory to include important social influences such as internalization and compliance. In 1992 Tetlock and his colleagues conducted the most comprehensive and rigorous study of the groupthink theory that included the Korean War case.³⁹ They found a positive correlation between Janis' groupthink cases and the ideal groupthink type and found strong evidence to support the groupthink model.⁴⁰

Implications of the Korean War Case Study

The Korean War case study shows strong evidence to support the occurrence of groupthink during strategic level planning and crisis management. The Korean War case also provides strong evidence to support the occurrence of groupthink at the operational level of command. The reliability of these case studies has been reanalyzed and confirmed by several other leading social scientists. This case study establishes the potential for the groupthink phenomenon to affect strategic and operational decision-making. While Janis concentrated mainly on strategic planning and national policy making groups, other social scientists have generalized and supported the occurrence of groupthink in smaller groups.

The occurrence of groupthink at the strategic and operational level as determined through case analysis and empirical evidence supports the occurrence of groupthink in smaller working and decision-making groups. This has significant implications for tactical decision-making. Battalions and brigades rely very heavily on small groups to support decision-making and planning. Empirical evidence indicates that small groups are vulnerable to influences that could lead to the occurrence of groupthink. It is very likely that these same conditions and influences will operate during small group activities at the battalion and brigade level. Further, there are

³⁸ Clark McCauley, "The Nature of Social Influence in Groupthink: Compliance and Internalization." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 3 (1989): 250-260.

³⁹ Philip E. Tetlock, Richard S. Peterson, Charles McGuire, Steven Chang, and P. Feld, "Assessing Political Group Dynamics: A Test of the Groupthink Model." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63 (1992): 403-425.

⁴⁰ James Esser, "Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73, no. 2/3 (1998): 123.

several common factors that the groups in the case studies and groups in battalions and brigades share. The conditions of time pressures, pressures of conformity, cohesion, presence of an external threat, and influences of leadership are common in both groups. These conditions are likely to promote the groupthink tendency at battalion and brigade level just as they promoted the groupthink tendency in the groups studied by Janis and other scientists.

Implications for Tactical Level Decision-Making

The likelihood of groupthink during tactical operations and its potentially negative effect on the quality of tactical decisions should be an important area of research for the US Army. Unfortunately this is not the case. The US Army has not paid any attention to groupthink or even the potential for other group behaviors and pressures to influence the quality of decisions. US Army doctrine does not address any group influences, behaviors, or factors that could affect decision-making. The US Army's Battle Command Battle Lab currently has no research projects that explore or even consider the influences of group dynamics on decision-making.⁴¹ The Army Research Institute has provided research support to the US Army in the area of command and control for years. However, a review of their research products provides little insight into the impact of group dynamics on decision-making, and no consideration of the occurrence of groupthink. The vast majority of research conducted by both these organizations is focused in the areas of improving cognitive learning and critical thinking of individuals. They are also exploring how commanders process information and make decisions, developing techniques for improving information management within command posts, and designing the most effective command post for the future. A review of available US Army research concerning command and control, planning, and decision-making does not leave the reader with any insights into the potential for group dynamics to influence decision making.

⁴¹ Based on a review of current research projects of the Battle Command Battle Lab, Fort Leavenworth, KS, conducted on September 6, 2000.

The US Army does have a near-perfect laboratory for exploring the occurrence of groupthink at the tactical level as well as the influence of other group dynamics on decision-making. The National Training Center (NTC) provides an ideal environment for exploring the occurrence of groupthink. The following case study provides an effective method for illustrating the effects of groupthink on tactical decision-making. The training mission analyzed had a poor mission outcome resulting from defective decision-making as determined by the observer/controllers during after action reviews and reports. The occurrence of groupthink is indicated by the presence of one or more groupthink symptoms supported by the presence of several antecedent conditions. The NTC provides a useful source of case studies due to the availability of accurately recorded data about the missions and the objective nature of observations and conclusions reached by the observer/controllers of Operations Group, NTC.⁴² The NTC's near combat-like conditions create stresses that are similar to actual force on force combat. The availability of accurate, objective records and the presence of combat-like stress during the training missions provide a reliable source for the following case study.

Tactical Level Case Study⁴³

After completing an attack against a defending enemy force the division ordered the brigade to conduct another attack the next day to complete the destruction of remaining enemy forces in zone. The brigade had about 14 hours to plan and prepare for the new mission. The brigade consisted of two battalion task forces, both with two tank and two mechanized infantry companies. The brigade's mission was to attack a defending enemy battalion. The brigade's plan was to attack with two task forces in column. The lead task force, Task Force 1, was to penetrate the enemy's security zone and main defensive belt. Task Force 2 was to follow Task Force 1 and after passing through the penetration complete the destruction of the defending enemy force by

⁴² Historical archives and restrictive databases from CALL provide the source for the NTC case study.

⁴³ The case study is based on an actual NTC training mission. Source of reference is the CALL restricted database containing NTC rotational archive materials. Unit designations, training dates, and other

envelopment. The brigade commander's intent was to conduct the penetration against either the enemy's northern or southern flank depending on which one was the weakest.

Task Force 1 developed its plan based on a penetration against the enemy's southern flank. The task force commander had directed this course of action based on the staff's recommendation that the southern flank would be the weakest flank. However, the recommendation was based on an enemy course of action that was largely based on assumptions rather than confirmed intelligence. The staff had only developed one enemy course of action during planning. The task force did not develop a plan for an attack against the northern flank. The commander and staff were in agreement that the northern attack option was very unlikely due to the anticipated enemy course of action, difficulty of the terrain in the north, and a feeling that the brigade commander favored the southern option. The option of attacking north was only briefly discussed during the task force rehearsal.

Later that night reports from brigade and battalion reconnaissance assets combined with intelligence from division indicated that the enemy's southern flank was the strongest. In the south the enemy was defending with an infantry strongpoint, anti-tank weapons in ambush positions, and a mechanized infantry company. An enemy scatterable mine-laying system was also reported near the southern flank. The task force staff, especially the intelligence officer, still maintained that the southern flank was the weakest. They assumed that the majority of enemy vehicles in the north had not been located, that the enemy would likely use persistent chemical weapons in the north, and the enemy's reserve was likely located near the northern flank. The task force commander, along with the staff still believed that attacking the southern flank was the best option.

The brigade commander discussed which flank to attack with his task force commanders prior to deciding. When the brigade commander stated he was anticipating attacking in the north

references linked to the unit are not used in accordance with CALL and NTC policies concerning the use of rotational data.

the commander of Task Force 1 disagreed. The task force commander recommended that the brigade attack in the south because he believed the enemy force in the south was weaker than the enemy force in the north, that his task force could still penetrate the known enemy forces in the south, and that his task force was better prepared to attack in the south. Based on this recommendation that brigade commander directed the brigade to attack against the enemy's southern flank.

Within two hours of beginning the attack the enemy had destroyed 50% of Task Force 1. Enemy security forces, anti-tank weapons, scatterable mines, and artillery inflicted heavy losses on the task force well forward of the enemy's main defensive belt. An hour later, after Task Force 1 was combat ineffective, the brigade commander ordered Task Force 2 to attack the enemy's northern flank. Remaining forces of Task Force 1 were attached to Task Force 2 for this new effort. Task Force 1 had failed in its mission. The task force was defeated in the enemy's security zone before reaching the main defensive belt.

This case study provides an excellent example of the occurrence of groupthink. The commander and staff's consensus that the enemy's southern flank was the weakest even in the presence of contrary information indicates groupthink. Groupthink played a role in the defective decision-making demonstrated by the commander and staff of Task Force 1. Several antecedent conditions and groupthink symptoms were evident in this case study.

Case Study Trends

The commander and staff of Task Force 1 had trained together for four to six months prior to their rotation at the NTC. The attack examined above was their sixth mission at the NTC. The battalion commander, executive officer, and operations officer had a good working relationship. There were seldom any disagreements among the staff and no one expressed any disagreements about the plan during mission planning. These factors indicate the commander and staff had a moderate to high degree of cohesion.

Based on observations from observer/controllers the battalion had difficulty with planning. While the battalion did utilize the MDMP for developing plans, several critical observations indicated that the battalion staff was poorly trained and inexperienced in the MDMP. They were unable to effectively utilize methodical decision-making processes during mission planning and execution. Observations included inadequate course of action development, poor staff integration and synchronization during COA analysis, and poor mission analysis. These weaknesses clearly helped facilitate defective decision-making during the training mission but also contributed to the occurrence of groupthink. As proposed by the groupthink model a lack of methodical planning procedures is an important antecedent condition that promotes the groupthink tendency.

Time pressures played a key role in the occurrence of groupthink during this case study. The battalion had less than 14 hours to plan and prepare for this mission after the conclusion of the previous mission. During this time the battalion had to occupy new assembly areas, attend after action reviews, conduct reconnaissance operations, secure their positions, and conduct reconstitution activities to restore their combat power from losses sustained during the last battle. There was little time available for the commander and staff to develop and issue the plan. Time pressures often aid in the occurrence of groupthink, especially for inexperienced or poorly trained groups.

The influences of promotional leadership were evident in this case study. The battalion commander directed a single course of action to the staff immediately after the mission analysis brief. This is not necessarily a bad technique or uncommon at the battalion level, it is often prudent when time is short. But the result in this case was to limit consideration of other potential options. It also helped create a group basis within the staff that clearly favored attacking in the south. The commander's early and strong promotion of the southern option helped maintain the staff's consensus that the southern option was the only feasible option.

The groupthink symptom of an “illusion of invulnerability” was present during this mission. The battalion commander and staff maintained that their developed course of action to attack in the south was still feasible even when the enemy’s strength was confirmed to be much stronger than originally anticipated. The battalion did not reconsider or refine its plan when intelligence reports confirmed the presence of an enemy infantry strongpoint and a scatterable mine-laying system along the southern flank. Instead the battalion maintained the consensus that their plan was still valid even when the force ratios and enemy capabilities had changed significantly. This influenced the battalion commander’s recommendation to the brigade commander to attack the enemy’s southern flank. The decision to attack in the south was based a clear overestimation of friendly capabilities.

The symptom of “collective rationalization” was also present during this mission. The commander and staff discounted critical information about the strength of the enemy defense along the southern flank. The staff rationalized that the north flank was actually very strong even in light of information showing the flank was weaker. They assumed the enemy’s reserve was positioned to reinforce this flank, that most of the enemy’s weapon systems in the north had not been located, and the enemy would use chemical weapons on this flank. The commander and staff rationalized that the battalion could still penetrate the enemy’s southern defense based on their level of preparations. In the end these rationalizations proved fatal.

Common Trends and Evaluation

An analysis of the presented case studies indicates the importance of several common antecedent conditions during military decision-making. Cohesion, time pressure, external threats, pressures of conformity, and leadership are recurring trends in these case studies. The following sections examine these conditions in greater depth.

Cohesion

Cohesion involves forces that cause members to remain in a group. These forces may include an interpersonal attraction between group members, commitment to the group task or

mission, and attractiveness of group prestige or pride derived from membership in the group. Cohesion is a critical attribute of a military organization, to include battalion and brigade staffs. Staff members must work together in order to synchronize activities and provide accurate, timely estimates to the commander. Field Manual (FM) 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations*, defines “being a team player” as one of the professional characteristics vital to a good staff officer. Additionally the field manual defines loyalty as another important characteristic of a good staff officer. Staff officers are to be loyal to their commander, fellow staff members, and the soldiers they support. US Army doctrine clearly recognizes the importance of developing cohesive staff teams.

Groupthink theory challenges the belief that greater group cohesion is always better. Janis generalized that cohesiveness was the crucial determinant that combined with other antecedent conditions to cause the groupthink tendency. Recent empirical evidence suggests that not only is group cohesion a necessary (although alone insufficient) condition, but groupthink symptoms can occur with as few as one additional antecedent variable. Studies conducted by Bernthal and Insko (1993) found that the type of cohesion being considered was an important variable.⁴⁴ Their studies found that social-emotional cohesion was more likely to contribute to groupthink symptoms than task-oriented cohesion. Their study concluded that groups with low social-emotional cohesion combined with high task-oriented cohesion had the lowest levels of groupthink.⁴⁵

Theoretically the MDMP and staff doctrine provide the foundation for creating a task-oriented environment. This doctrine and empirical evidence from the Bernthal and Insko studies suggest two generalizations about the role of cohesion during military decision-making. Firstly, the deliberate use of the MDMP; with judicious information search and analysis (within the

⁴⁴ Philip R. Bernthal and Chad A. Insko, "Cohesiveness without Groupthink: The Interactive Effects of Social and Task Cohesion." *Group and Organization Management* 18 (1993): 66-87.

⁴⁵ Annette Flippen, "Understanding Groupthink from a Self-Regulatory Perspective." *Small Group Research* 10, no. 2 (1999): 140.

constraints usually imposed by the time available, mission, threat, and organizational resources) should generally result in fewer occurrences of groupthink, and therefore better mission outcomes. Secondly, the development and adherence to standard operating procedures within the staff that focus each member on the planning tasks at hand should aid in keeping the staff task oriented and therefore reduce the likelihood of groupthink occurrences.

Effective utilization of the MDMP should ensure that the staff adheres to a highly structured and systematic decision making process that reinforces task cohesion. “This should serve as a mechanism toward avoidance of the groupthink symptoms of pressure toward uniformity by promoting constructive criticism, nonconformity, and open-mindedness within the decision-making group.”⁴⁶ The importance of methodical decision-making and planning processes calls critical attention to the importance of staff training. Staffs that are well trained and experienced with the use of the MDMP should be less vulnerable to the occurrence of groupthink. But trends reported by the Center of Army Lessons Learned (CALL) show that commanders and staffs struggle to use of the MDMP effectively.⁴⁷ These trends call attention to the need for effective staff training in utilizing the MDMP.

Role of Leadership

Leadership is a critical aspect of all military operations and a contributing factor in the development of groupthink. Although generalizations about leadership practices apply most directly to the commander, they also apply to the XO or any influential staff member who takes the lead in directing a staff group’s activities. Empirical studies have concluded that promotional leadership, where the leader promotes one idea very early in planning instead of encouraging the generation of many ideas, positively relates to the occurrence of groupthink.⁴⁸ A solution that is

⁴⁶ Christopher P. Neck and Gregory P. Moorhead, "Groupthink Remodeled: The Importance of Leadership, Time Pressure, and Methodical Decision-Making Procedures." *Human Relations* 48 (1995): 549.

⁴⁷ See the following CALL publications: NTC Trends 98-14, NTC Trends Compendium 97-17, NTC Priority Trends, and NTC Trends, FY 98.

⁴⁸ Clark McCauley, "The Nature of Social Influence in Groupthink: Compliance and Internalization." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 3 (1989): 250-260.

heavily promoted by a leader will usually have greater weight within the group than one equally weighted by a group member of lesser status.⁴⁹

In tactical operations it is often acceptable and prudent for the commander to give very detailed planning guidance or even dictate a friendly course of action to the staff very early in the planning process. The factors of time, mission, threat, and staff experience often dictate this technique.⁵⁰ The commander should understand the potential risks associated with promoting or directing a single, pre-selected course of action. A course of action promoted very early in the planning process has the potential to result in sub-optimized solutions. It also has the potential to cause an impartial search for evidence or information that threatens the promoted solution and an overweighing of evidence that could favor the promoted course of action. However, the commander must often make trade-offs between time and quality of a plan to maintain momentum during operations. But this fact does not change the generalization used in this research that a course of action promoted very early in the planning process increases the probability of the occurrence of groupthink. Professionally competent staff members and an environment that promotes impartial information searching and critical analysis is key to offset the groupthink tendency. Further, when the commander dictates a single course of action very early in the planning process, the course of action must provide sufficient flexibility to allow for adjustments as new information is gathered.

Time Pressure

“Pressures due to constraints of time is a perceptual condition in which members of the group feel they have a very limited amount of time in which to make a decision.”⁵¹ A case study of the space shuttle Challenger decision by Christopher Moorhead, Richard Ference, and Gregory

⁴⁹ Annette Flippen, "Understanding Groupthink from a Self-Regulatory Perspective." *Small Group Research* 10, no. 2 (1999): 146.

⁵⁰ Department of the Army. *FM 101-5 Staff Organization and Procedures*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1997), 5-28.

⁵¹ Christopher P. Neck and Gregory Moorhead, "Groupthink Remodeled: The Importance of Leadership, Time Pressure, and Methodical Decision-Making Procedures." *Human Relations* 48 (1995): 546.

Neck showed that groupthink was partially induced by time pressures.⁵² Janis explained that time pressures affected the mental processes of the decision-makers and increased the cohesiveness within the groups. Two key studies by Isenberg (1981) and Kelly and McGrath (1985) found that reduced time reduced the quality of group decisions and products. The authors suggested that groups operating under time constraints communicated and interacted less with each other during planning.⁵³ The groups in both case studies in this monograph were operating under time constraints. Time pressure is an antecedent condition that directly contributes to the groupthink tendency.

External Threats

External threats, such as being defeated in a struggle, generally increase the concurrence-seeking tendency within decision-making groups.⁵⁴ Studies by Flippen, Homstein, Siegel, and Weitzman (1996) have shown an external threat is a direct cause of in-group biases, and thus contribute to the groupthink tendency.⁵⁵ Battalions and brigades operate under the constant and extreme external threat of fighting a thinking adversary. In the North Korean conflict and NTC case studies both groups were operating under the threat of an enemy force. This antecedent condition is always present during tactical missions and is one source that contributes to the groupthink tendency.

Pressures towards Conformity

The groupthink theory suggests a positive relationship between higher group cohesiveness and the pressure of conformity on group members. Groupthink tendency occurs when cohesiveness and one or more other antecedent factors combine to cause concurrence seeking by the group members. Individual group members are convinced of the validity of the

⁵² Gregory Moorhead, Richard Ference, and Christopher P. Neck, "Group Decision Fiascoes Continue: Space Shuttle Challenger and a Revised Groupthink Framework." *Human Relations* 44 (1991): 539-550.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 547.

⁵⁴ Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 255.

⁵⁵ Annette Flippen, "Understanding Groupthink from a Self-Regulatory Perspective." *Small Group Research* 10, no. 2 (1999): 141.

group's position or at least pressured to accept or not oppose the group's position. There are two types of conformity that may occur as a result of this group pressure – compliance and internalization.⁵⁶ Compliance occurs when an individual privately retains his previous opinion but publicly accepts or promotes the group position to achieve a favorable reaction from the group.⁵⁷ Internalization occurs when the individual is convinced, both privately and publicly of the validity of the group's position. Studies by McCauley in 1989 found examples of groupthink occurring with both types of conformity.⁵⁸

The reasons for conformity are many. Time pressures tend to create more stress within planning groups, creating the need to arrive at a solution more quickly. Other in-group pressures associated with cohesion also tend to reinforce the phenomena of conformity, leading to the occurrence of groupthink. Also an individual's perception of their status within a group plays a crucial role. Often individual group members will not voice concerns, opinions, or disagreements because they do not want to disrupt the group process, be seen as a trouble maker, lose group acceptance, or jeopardize their group status.

Conclusion

The case studies provided in this chapter establish the potential for the occurrence of groupthink at the tactical level. The NTC case study provided a good example of groupthink contributing to defective decision-making and a poor mission outcome. Several trends that are of significant importance to the occurrence of groupthink at the tactical level were examined based on empirical research in the field of group studies. Now that the occurrence of groupthink at the tactical level is established the important issue becomes understanding techniques that could mitigate the occurrence of groupthink.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 142.

⁵⁷ Clark McCauley, "The Nature of Social Influence in Groupthink: Compliance and Internalization." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 3 (1989): 255.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of his book *Groupthink*, Janis formulated a set of potential solutions about how to prevent groupthink. Janis's recommended solutions are summarized below in outline form.⁵⁹

- Each member must be a critical evaluator of the group's course of action; the leader should encourage an open climate of giving and accepting criticism.
- Leaders should be impartial and refrain from stating their personal preferences at the outset of group discussion; they should limit themselves initially to fostering open inquiry.
- Set up parallel groups working on the same policy question under different leaders.
- Each member of the group should privately discuss current issues and options with trusted associates outside the group and report back their reactions.
- Different outside experts should be brought in from time to time to challenge the views of the core members.
- There should be one or more devil's advocates during every group meeting.
- In conflict situations, extra time should be devoted to interpreting warning signals from rivals and to constructing alternative scenarios of their intentions.
- Second chance meetings should be held to reconsider the decision once it has been reached and before it is made public.

Janis derived these recommendations from his analysis of selected governmental case studies. The recommendations are obviously best applied in a policymaking or governmental decision-making environment, but many still have applicability to tactical level decision-making. Tactical level decision-making and planning occurs in an environment where the constraints of

⁵⁹ Recommendations to prevent groupthink were taken from Hart, Paul. *Beyond Groupthink, Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-Making*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 322.

time, organization, and personnel limit the available options. Additional techniques and considerations apply to tactical level planning. The following sections will examine potential solutions for preventing groupthink in a military decision-making environment.

Role of the Commander

The commander drives the MDMP by issuing his planning guidance and intent, as well as through his personal involvement and leadership during planning. As a result of his critical role during planning the commander can help prevent groupthink. His role generally falls into two interrelated categories: leadership and command climate. As discussed earlier leadership style is an important factor contributing to the occurrence of groupthink. A directive or promotional leadership style typically yields significantly poorer quality decisions.⁶⁰ Further, promotional leadership tends to increase the groupthink tendency as indexed by number of solutions and number of facts brought up by the decision-making groups. If groupthink results from premature consensus, insufficient information search, and a failure to examine all potential alternatives then an impartial leadership style provides a potential counter. The goal is a leadership style that encourages airing of doubts and objections within the staff, encourages a thorough search and evaluation of available information, and promotes procedural norms that support consideration of multiple courses of action.

Closely related to leadership is the commander's development of a command climate that promotes an impartial search for and a critical evaluation of relevant information. His command climate should also encourage an open exchange of ideas and an unbiased examination of courses of action during planning. The commander should create an environment that rewards both individual contributions to solutions as well as group products. The commander should create a climate that promotes critical thinking and analysis by individual staff officers. The commander

⁶⁰ The negative effect of directive leadership on decision quality is discussed in *Victims of Groupthink* by Irving Janis (1972) and is confirmed by empirical studies described by Clark McCauley in "The Nature of Social Influence in Groupthink: Compliance and Internalization." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 3 (1989): 250-260.

must not mistake silence for consent. He should always question staff products and recommendations in detail. The commander must understand how his leadership, force of will, and personality affects the overall performance of the staff.

Because time is usually limited during planning at the tactical level the commander must carefully balance the demands for developing high quality plans and timely plans. The desire is to produce the best possible plan within a limited amount of time. Unfortunately this goal is seldom possible. Normally constraints demand the development of a plan that satisfies the immediate demands of the situation within the available time while potentially sacrificing the development of the best possible plan. FM 101-5 addresses the considerations of balancing time with the development of plans and also provides four time saving techniques.⁶¹ The commander and staff must understand that time saving techniques used to shorten the planning process may also increase the likelihood for the occurrence of groupthink. Efforts to improve the quality of plans such as increased analysis, gathering of more information, and detailed war gaming tend to lengthen the planning process. But the techniques to improve the quality of plans also tend to reduce the occurrence of groupthink. This is the essence of the dilemma.

Another balancing act that the commander must contend with is instilling a shared vision of his intent while promoting a critical analysis of the situation. In some cases these values may conflict with each other. The commander and XO must develop a common understanding of the commander's vision for the operation in order to develop a suitable and acceptable plan. But they must also ensure that the common vision does not develop into a group bias that promotes information distortion, reduces impartial information search and evaluation, and increases pressures towards conformity. These factors are indicators of the groupthink tendency that ultimately results in poorer quality decision outcomes. The staff must understand that even when the commander issues very detailed planning guidance it does not reduce the need for critical, thorough analysis of information and potential courses of action.

There are no easy solutions for resolving these two potential conflicts. The importance of an effective and well-developed mission analysis is evident. The products from mission analysis ultimately define the essential factors of the situation (mission, enemy, time available, troops available, terrain and weather, and civil considerations [METT-TC]) while providing the basis for the commander's assessment of the situation and battlefield visualization. By devoting adequate time to this step of the MDMP, and by stressing a critical and thorough analysis of all available data the staff can reduce the potential for the occurrence of groupthink by reducing the level of uncertainty about the situation. The commander and all staff members must understand the warning signs and symptoms of groupthink. The commander must promote a climate that stresses the importance of critical analysis and impartial information search of all relevant factors about the situation.

An unbiased and critical analysis of developed courses of action during the planning process is another critical factor that tends to reduce the occurrence of groupthink. A technique that requires each staff member to assess and state the tactical risks and potential areas of failure for each course of action provides a mechanism that ensures any doubts or areas of concern are considered during the planning process, reducing the potential for the development of group biases and external compliance. Even when the commander is forced to direct the development of a single course of action the staff must provide an unbiased and critical analysis of the course of action. When a single course of action is developed the staff must ensure that it contains sufficient flexibility to succeed against all likely enemy courses of action. Ultimately the importance of staff training is likely to provide the best solution for the prevention of groupthink.

Staff Training

The importance of effective staff training cannot be underestimated in the quest to reduce the occurrence of groupthink. A staff that has trained and worked together for a long time provides a foundation for the development of group procedures, norms, and rules that promote

⁶¹ See FM 101-5, *Staff organization and Procedures*, Chapter 5.

critical analysis while reducing the factors that contribute to the occurrence of groupthink. Research conducted by Zenglo Chen and Robert Lawson indicates groups that have worked together longer develop stronger group decision-making norms and procedures than groups that have been together for shorter periods of time.⁶² Staff training should focus on the effective use of the MDMP since research shows methodical decision-making procedures aid in reducing the occurrence of groupthink. Also the development and use of staff planning procedures (standard operating procedures) that clearly focus on individual staff members' contribution to the staff planning process aids in the reduction of the groupthink tendency.

Staff training must incorporate both individual and team training. Individual training must concentrate on individual technical and tactical skills covering the staff member's area of responsibility. Individual training must also concentrate on developing critical analysis and thinking skills in order to reduce the likelihood of developing biases, distorting information, and succumbing to the pressures of conformity. Team training should focus on developing group norms, procedures, and decision rules. The goal of staff training is to develop group decision-making procedures and information evaluation techniques that ensure information and ideas are pooled and that staff analysis averages away individual biases without developing pressures for conformity.⁶³ Evaluation of staff training requires special attention.

Evaluation of staff group processes requires special training in order to provide adequate feedback that improves both individual and group products. Accountability of individual contributions as well as the overall group product is the goal. An exclusive reliance on group level accountability mechanisms may actually reinforce groupthink tendencies by encouraging social loafing and avoidance behavior among group members.⁶⁴ Accountability processes must

⁶² Zenglo Chen and Robert B. Lawson, "Deciding with the Leader and the Devil's Advocate." *Psychological Record* 46, no. 4 (1996): 10.

⁶³ For a more detailed discussion of team training see – Gray A. Klein, "Team Decision Training: Five Myths and a Model." *Military Review*, April (1993): 8.

⁶⁴ Paul Hart, "Preventing Groupthink Revisited." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73, no. 2 (1998): 25.

make staff members feel that they will be held responsible for their individual contributions to the group's process and decisions.⁶⁵ This requires that evaluators focus on individual processes as well as group processes. This means that effective evaluation of staff training would normally require multiple evaluators trained in staff procedures and individual staff skills. Also evaluators need to understand basic group behaviors, groupthink, and other group biases. After action reviews should incorporate feedback on group processes, individual contributions, and the quality of group and individual products. Training of staff groups must begin with a foundation of planning doctrine that addresses the dynamics of planning as a group process.

Doctrine

Tactical planning is normally done in a group decision-making environment that is subject to many social factors and group pressures such as the vulnerability to the occurrence of groupthink. As a result Army planning and decision making doctrine should cover group processes and provide techniques for the mitigation of negative group behaviors, such as groupthink. Army doctrine must address decision-making and planning as a group process as well as an individual act. FM 101-5 provides no discussions about the group pressures and factors that may affect the quality of decisions and plans. Currently the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth is developing a new field manual that covers planning called FM 5-0, *Planning*. This new planning manual should provide an appendix that addresses topics such as group biases, groupthink, and other social pressures that could affect planning. The appendix should provide a detailed discussion about groupthink, covering warning signs, symptoms, and mitigation techniques. There is a large body of available research that addresses group decision-making, groupthink, and other group behaviors. Field manual 5-0 should also provide an appendix that covers staff group training. The appendix should stress the importance of holding

⁶⁵ For more detailed research and findings about de-individuation, social loafing, and the importance of individual accountability during team training see – Bill Mullen, "Group Composition, Salience, and Cognitive Representations: The Phenomenology of Being in a Group." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 27 (1991): 25.

individual staff members accountable for their contributions to the staff planning process, provide guidance on incorporating group behavior and processes into the evaluation process, and training evaluators on group pressures and influences that lead to negative tendencies such as groupthink.

Many management periodicals have identified brainstorming as one technique that helps mitigate the occurrence of groupthink by identifying multiple alternatives to a problem.⁶⁶ Field Manual 101-5 briefly mentions brainstorming as a technique to use in developing options that are later developed into courses of action.⁶⁷ But greater detail is needed in future planning doctrine to explain how to properly brainstorm. Research shows that specific rules are needed to guide the process of brainstorming. These rules include stressing quantity instead of quality when coming up with options, properly documenting every potential option, avoiding negative comments and evaluation about options, and avoiding individual ownership of generated options.⁶⁸ During tactical planning, the staff can quickly identify multiple options for potential development into courses of action by considering different forms of maneuver, task organizations, directions and times of attack, and schemes of maneuver. Once these potential options are identified a quick assessment by the staff, possibly with the commander, can identify those options with the best potential for development into courses of action. This technique helps ensure the staff considers all the possible options to a tactical problem before proceeding further into course of action development and analysis steps of the MDMP.

The Combined Arms Center has recently released FM 6-0, *Command and Control*, for Army-wide staffing. This new field manual covers a wide range of topics concerning command and control of military operations. The manual provides extensive discussions about various aspects of command, but the field manual fails to bring attention to any group behaviors and processes that influence decision-making and planning. The manual should provide some

⁶⁶ See Beaubien, E. E. "Doing Groupthink." *Successful Meetings* 45, no. 8 (1996): 4.

⁶⁷ Department of the Army. *FM 101-5 Staff Organization and Procedures*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1997), 5-12.

discussions about understanding, identifying, and preventing negative group behaviors such as groupthink to aid commanders in the exercise of effective command. By addressing groupthink and other group behaviors in doctrine the Army will facilitate a greater understanding of group processes in officer education programs.

Officer Education

Officer education programs should integrate training and teaching of group behavior, groupthink, and group decision-making. The Army should integrate subjects such as group behavior, preventing groupthink, and training staff group skills into all institutional training schools for officers from the captain level to the colonel level. The Combined Arms Service and Staff School should introduce captains to these subjects. The Command and General Staff College should integrate these subjects as part of its core curriculum during leadership and training blocks of instruction. Likewise, groupthink and group behaviors should be reinforced during all pre-command courses for future commanders.

Understanding groupthink and group behavior is vital to reducing its negative effects on planning and decision-making. Recognizing tactical decision making as primarily a group process is the first step in this process. Army doctrine must incorporate more discussion and guidance on group behaviors, group training, and groupthink. Institutional training programs for officers should reinforce this new doctrine during all officer-training programs. Staff training should focus on the use of methodical decision making and planning procedures that stress critical analysis of available information and courses of action. The commander can aid in preventing groupthink by exercising leadership and developing a command climate that promotes objective and unbiased exchanges of information and recommendations during planning. The occurrence of groupthink can be reduced at the tactical level by training the staff in using

⁶⁸ Recommended brainstorming rules adapted from Eric E. Beaubien, "Doing Groupthink." *Successful Meetings* 45, no. 8 (1996): 4.

methodical planning procedures, creating a command climate that promotes critical analysis, and instituting evaluation mechanisms that holds individuals and groups accountable during planning.

CONCLUSIONS

Irving Janis' classic study introduced the theory of groupthink and sparked an explosion of research into group behaviors and processes. Since 1972 the theory of groupthink has been integrated into numerous fields of study such as social psychology, decision-making sciences, and management fields. Unfortunately the Army has not considered the potentially negative effects of groupthink on military decision-making. Army doctrine and research has consistently ignored groupthink and paid little attention to group processes that may affect decision-making. Army sponsored research has almost exclusively focused on decision-making as an individual act rather than as a group process, but tactical decision-making is primarily done in a group environment. The MDMP, the Army's doctrinal planning process, is a process that is based on inputs, analysis, and recommendations of staff members and the commander, making it a group decision-making process. As such, tactical planning is subject to most generalizations about group behaviors and is vulnerable to the occurrence of groupthink.

The evidence and research presented in this monograph indicates that groupthink is one factor that reduces the quality of tactical decisions. The case studies contained in this research have shown the occurrence of groupthink at during military operations. The NTC case study provided an example of the occurrence of groupthink during a tactical level training exercise. In that example groupthink was one of the factors that contributed to mission failure. The conclusion that groupthink is negatively affecting tactical planning and decision-making is further supported by numerous empirical studies.

Given the tremendous consequences involved in tactical level decisions this phenomena warrants further research and study. Understanding all the factors that reduce the quality of tactical decisions is even more critical than ever as the Army works towards building digital, interim, and objective forces for the future. The Army should sponsor further studies and

research to fully understand the extent and frequency of the occurrence of groupthink during tactical planning. The NTC provides an excellent laboratory for conducting this type of research. The NTC training environment closely replicates the uncertain, time-constraint and high threat conditions of combat. Results from these studies would help in the development of new training techniques, planning procedures, doctrine, and educational methods that would improve the performance of combat units.

Based on the evidence presented in this research from case studies and empirical studies groupthink does affect tactical decision making. Battalions and brigades are vulnerable to the occurrence of groupthink. The Army should address reducing the occurrence of groupthink by integrating group decision-making, behavior, and processes into doctrine, officer training, and staff training. Army decision-making and planning doctrine should provide discussions about group behaviors and processes. Doctrine should also cover the warning signs, symptoms, and mitigation techniques for groupthink. Officer training should reinforce doctrinal guidance about groupthink by integrating group behavior subjects and techniques for mitigating groupthink in all institutional training programs. Staff training programs should concentrate on training and executing the MDMP with a focus on developing critical analysis skills and impartial information search and evaluation abilities. Evaluation of staff training events requires special attention. Evaluation mechanisms must provide feedback on individual contributions to the staff group, group dynamics, and group products.

Groupthink is preventable. Janis provides several examples of policy decisions and crisis management scenarios that were handled effectively while avoiding the tendency of groupthink. Future commanders and staffs can also avoid the tendency of groupthink too. Effective training guided by doctrine that provides adequate attention to group decision-making is the best solution for reducing the occurrence of the groupthink tendency. By understanding how groups behave and the negative processes that reduce group performance future commanders and staffs can avoid the pitfalls of groupthink.

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